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Sneaky Suspicions in the Israeli Spy Case

By WILLIAM SEAMANS

TEL AVIV—One of the many surprising aspects of the Pollard spy affair is how quickly the controversy was cauterized in a coordinated effort by Jerusalem and Washington.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz telephoned Prime Minister Shimon Peres at 3:30 a.m. Sunday, and the official Israeli apology was issued 14 hours later at 5 p.m. with a virtually simultaneous response of appreciation from Shultz.

It is known that Peres talked to Shultz for at least a half-hour, leaving little doubt that the Peres statement was worked out to their mutual satisfaction during that chat.

Following all the questions that arose after the Pollard affair exploded last week, the speedy denouement raises other queries—such as why was one of the worst interludes in U.S.-Israeli relations turned so swiftly into another effusive reaffirmation of the warm "special relationship" between the two countries?

From sources here there is an indication that the United States was eager to turn off the pressure as soon as a face-saving statement was issued by the Israelis, because the story was getting dangerously close to the backlash stage. To push a little further might have turned up information

that at the end of the day would be equally embarrassing to the United States.

Some of the information from various sources close to the government indicated that the intelligence that American Jonathan J. Pollard has been accused of passing on to Israeli agents strongly suggested that the United States had an effective probe into the Israeli defense establishment. Thus, had the Israelis by a quirk of the intelligence game stumbled across evidence that the United States was spying on them? Had the Israelis initiated a back-check that determined that the source of information that the United States had about Israeli security matters was deeper than the integrity of the information that they had exchanged by agreement? Did the Israelis present the United States with this covert knowledge and ask in effect: "Do you really want to pursue this thing beyond our abject apology?"

The second backlash possibility is the awareness that the United States, while exchanging intelligence information with Israel, was withholding material most vital to Israel's security—what the United States knows about the Arab forces surrounding Israel. Evaluations of the U.S.-Egyptian "Brightstar" maneuvers with Egyptian forces were not on the exchange menu and allegedly were one of the main objectives of the Pollard operation.

On the other hand, the Israelis claim that they have made available to the United States—with samples yet—all that they have learned about the Soviet order of battle taught to the Syrian and Egyptian forces.

For instance, the Israelis shared with the United States all the information that they gained when their pilots, flying against Syrians instructed in Soviet air doctrine, became the first to prove that American F-15 and F-16 jet fighters are really capable of the combat performance that the design computers predicted.

Much of what the Israelis supply has been absorbed discreetly by the Pentagon so as not to antagonize the Arab side of the balanced relationship that the United States tries to maintain here in the Middle East.

In effect, Israel has been a very potent and productive "closet ally" of the U.S. military intelligence community. Would the backlash have revealed that the U.S. was spying on its most effective surrogate spy here in the Middle East?

For the sake of pursuing broader American geopolitical interests in this part of the world, the scenario has been one of "the less said about this area of U.S.-Israeli cooperation the better." The Pollard case looked as if it was reaching the stage at which too much publicity might be given to highly sensitive sectors of American interest.

From the Israeli perception, much has been said about how amateurish the Pollard operation was, what a stupid mistake it was to use an American Jew to spy for Israel in the United States, and so on.

But I have been asked by many Israelis, "Was it not an American intelligence blunder to have picked up Pollard in such a way that a media circus was inescapable as the immediate result—why wasn't he picked up discreetly?" Since there is a "special relationship" and the case did not involve the Soviet KGB, did not this intelligence aberration almost demand that it be handled in a "special" way as a "special" mutual problem?

As the American intelligence community has admitted, Israel did what it had to do because of the unique security challenge that it faces.

But perhaps the most profound evaluation of the whole fiasco came from former CIA Director Richard Helms, who said, "The only sin in spying is to get caught in the act."

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